



Name of Project: Oklahoma Aging Advocacy Leadership Academy

Organization: Oklahoma Aging Services Division, Oklahoma City, OK

Principle of Choices for Independence: Empowerment/Access to Information and Services

Description

Recognizing the value of a renewable core of well-trained aging advocates and volunteers, the Oklahoma Aging Services Division of the Department of Human Services (OKDHS) established the Oklahoma Aging Advocacy Leadership Academy (“Academy”) which is designed to identify and develop volunteer leaders and advocates on issues related to aging. The Academy empowers committed leaders to successfully advocate for older Oklahomans and is a successful, nationally recognized model for training volunteer advocates on the issues and needs of the rapidly growing population of older citizens.

In 1998 the Academy was developed and implemented through a grant from the Oklahoma Developmental Disability(DD) Council. The DD Council had become increasingly concerned about aging persons with developmental disabilities and it decided to fund an integrated advocacy-training program that incorporated disability topics. The project was funded for one year of development and two years of project operation. Oklahoma businesses saw the value of helping with continuation funding and began to make commitments to support the Academy. The organization also has received in-kind support from other state agencies and organizations, as well as some Academy presenters.

In the process of planning the Academy, OKDHS extensively searched existing leadership and advocacy models, particularly those with an emphasis on aging. The educational model that evolved was designed to suit the needs and interests of adult learners, especially those who had been away from an academic setting for many years.

The overriding goal of the model was to employ a learner-friendly format. The weekend sessions emphasize brief presentations, discussion sessions, experiential activities, small work group activities, student project presentations, exercises in critical thinking, and role playing. The curriculum includes two basic tracks: specific age-related content and advocacy/voluntary skills training. Elements of these two tracks are blended throughout the 10 weekend sessions.

The Academy sought statewide participation from two distinct groups: a) retired persons ready to become active advocates and b) baby boomers who are often beginning to deal with aging issues and may have concerns about their roles as caregivers. The general public is informed about the Academy through news releases.

The Academy meets one weekend each month from September through July, excluding December. All sessions are held in Oklahoma City which has a central location in the state. During each monthly session, Academy participants hear directly from agencies and organizations that rely on volunteers. They hear personal accounts of successes and failures in leadership, volunteering and advocacy from people who have been directly involved. The personal testimonies of advocates, volunteers, agency staff and policy makers help participants determine what type of volunteer and advocacy activities they would like to pursue.

Participants have been recruited from throughout Oklahoma and their activities have benefited communities in all regions of the state, including rural and urban settings. Past participants have come from more than 45 cities and communities across the state and from diverse backgrounds including ministers, nurses, teachers, retired persons, business executives, representatives of the hospitality industry, and the Red Cross. To date, approximately 150 participants have attended at the Academy and about 100 remain active advocates. The Academy has resulted in 1) the self-identification of people who are interested in aging advocacy and volunteer activities, 2) the provision of relevant skills and a knowledge base that gives participants the foundation to be successful volunteer leaders and advocates, 3) the reinforcement of the notion that volunteering and advocacy for elders are crucial and challenging activities, and 4) assembling a group of diverse but like-minded people who learned from one another and generated enthusiasm among themselves. The program has had a beneficial impact upon the aging network in Oklahoma.

For more information on the programs offered by the Oklahoma Aging Services Division and the Oklahoma Aging Advocacy Leadership Academy visit the Oklahoma Aging Services Division website at

<http://www.okdhs.org/programsandservices/docs/olderoklahomans.htm> or contact Judy Leitner at www.Judy.Leitner@okdhs.org or call (405) 521-2327.